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Poetry After Mauschwitz: Holocaust Memory in Art Spiegelman's Maus

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While the Holocaust is the most well-documented genocide in history, precisely how the Holocaust is remembered depends on the texts that give it form.[1] One of the most controversial of these texts is Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. On the surface, *Maus* is the two-volume story of Vladek Spiegelman, a Holocaust survivor, narrating the story of his survival to his son Art Spiegelman. What is immediately notable about *Maus* is Spiegelman's use of the comic book format — an unprecedented medium of portraying the Holocaust. The appropriateness of Spiegelman's comic format raises crucial questions regarding the "limits of representation" in the case of the Holocaust.[2] For instance, Spiegelman's work is problematic for those who believe that the Holocaust can only be represented through historical fact, as embodied in Elie Weisel's statement that, "A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka."[3] While Spiegelman would object to *Maus'* classification as a "novel," he certainly takes significant creative licence is his work — most prominently in his decision to depict Jews as mice and Nazis as cats.[4] For Spiegelman, *Maus* is a story about his own process of bearing witness to the Holocaust through its traumatic legacy. In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman confronts the difficulties of writing about the enormity of the Holocaust as a second-generation survivor by engaging with themes of trauma, generational transmission, and post-memory. This is illustrated through the three narrative layers of *Maus* — Vladek's story of his survival, Art's narration of Vladek's testimony, and Art's meta-commentary on the creation of the work.[5]

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[1] Raphael Lemkin and Steven Leonard Jacobs. *Lemkin on Genocide,* (Lexington books, 2012): vii.
[2] Hayden White, *"Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth." Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution."* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992): 37-53.
[3] Rosemary Horowitz, *Elie Wiesel and the art of storytelling.* (McFarland, 2006): 117.
[4] The New York Times Book Review, 29 December 1991, 4.
[5] The name 'Art' will be used to denote the character in the text while the name 'Spiegelman' will be used to denote the author of the text.

Literary works about the Holocaust often raise debate over the ethics of artistically representing such an event, evoking Theodor Adorno's famous statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[6] While Adorno later revised his statement, there remains debate over whether it is ethical to write stories about the Holocaust, especially when the author of the work did not personally live through the Holocaust.[7] However, James E. Young makes the case for artistically engaging with the subject of the Holocaust by asserting that:

> to leave Auschwitz outside of metaphor would be to leave it outside of language altogether: it was known, understood, and responded to metaphorically at the time by its victims; it has been organized, expressed, and interpreted metaphorically by its writers; and it is now being remembered, commented upon, and given historical meaning metaphorically by scholars and poets of the next generation. If carried to its literal end, an injunction against Auschwitz metaphors would place events outside of language and meaning altogether, thereby mystifying the Holocaust and accomplishing after the fact precisely what the Nazis had hoped to accomplish through their own — often metaphorical — mystification of events.[8]

As well, since they themselves have often been victim to their parents' mystification of the Holocaust, second-generation Holocaust writers often engage with the problematics of representation and the dangers of considering the Holocaust as being outside the realm of narration in their work.[9] Spiegelman specifically engages with this question in *Maus* when Art's therapist suggests that, since the victims who died in the Holocaust can no longer tell their story, perhaps it is better not to have any more stories on the subject.[10] Art responds with the statement, "Samuel Beckett once said: 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and

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[6] Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society." *Prisms.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988): 18-34.
[7] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (Routledge: London, 1973): 62
[8] James E. Young, *Writing and rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the consequences of interpretation.* (Indiana University Press, 1990): 91.
[9] Deborah R. Geis, *Considering Maus: approaches to Art Spiegelman's Survivor's tale of the Holocaust.* (University Alabama Press, 2003): 4.
[10] Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History.* (New York: Pantheon, 1992): 45.

nothingness.'…On the other hand, he said it"[11] Through this, Spiegelman weaves the difficulty of telling the story of the Holocaust into the work itself.

The publication of *Maus*, the first volume of which was released in 1986 and the second in 1991, coincided with and helped to define an important turning point in the history of Holocaust testimony.[12] Approximately forty years after the end of the Holocaust, many survivors had come to recognize the importance of documenting their experience.[13] For their children, this often meant participating in the process of bearing witness by encouraging their parents to share their story, as well as coming to terms with the fact that their parents' experience had already been passed onto them through its traumatic legacy.[14] The term "second-generation survivor" underscores their role as being both victims and survivors of the Holocaust by bearing witness to its aftermath.[15] For members of second-generation, the defining moment of their lives happened before they were even born and, as a result, many were left "possessed by a history they had never lived."[16] This underscores the central problem of identity in *Maus*, which manifests through Spiegelman's effort to write himself into the history of his own family from whose founding trauma he was absent. "Post-memory," a term coined by Marianne Hirsch upon reading *Maus*, exemplifies the strategies those of the second-generation use to cope with the "present

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Michael G. Levine, "Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's Maus and the Bleeding of History." *American Imago* 59, no. 3 (2002): 317.
[13] Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 143.
[14] Levine, 317.
[15] Thane Rosenbaum, *Second Hand Smoke: A Novel* (New York, 1999), 2–3.
[16] Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (London: Penguin, 1988): 14.

absence" of the Holocaust and respond to the trauma experienced by the first-generation.[17] Hirsch defines post-memory as, "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to constitute memories in their own right."[18] Post-memory is of great significance in *Maus* since it is a form of "recollection…through representation, projection, and creation," a process that is artistically represented throughout the three narrative levels of the story.[19]

Narrative Level One: Vladek's Story

The first volume of *Maus* is subtitled *My Father Bleeds History* — emblematic of the fact that the dissemination of his story is not without cost for Vladek. In fact, Spiegelman reports that his father had "no desire to bear witness," as Vladek claims in the text that "no one wants anyway to hear such stories"[20] While Vladek tells his story, he does in fact "bleed history" as the trauma he experienced during the Holocaust comes through in his present-day testimony. For instance, while narrating his time working as a prisoner-of-war cleaning stables, he interrupts his own story to reprimand Art for dropping cigarette ashes on the carpet saying "But look what you do, Artie! You're dropping on the carpet cigarette ashes. You want it should be like a stable here?"[21] This instance alludes to the way the past invades present, suggesting that Vladek's process of remembering the past constitutes a psychological reconstruction of the past in the present day.[22] Spiegelman illustrates this process more explicitly when he draws Art's cigarette

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[17] Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 no. 1 (2001): 9; Alan L. Berger, *Children of Job: American second-generation witnesses to the Holocaust.* (SUNY press, 2012): 2.
[18] Marianne Hirsch, "The generation of postmemory." *Poetics today* 29, no. 1 (2008): 103.
[19] Hirsch, "Surviving Images," 9.
[20] Interview with Joey Cavalieri et al. *The New Comics: Interviews from the Pages of the Comics Journal.* (New York: Berkley, 1988): 192; Spiegelman, *Maus I:* 12.
[21] Spiegelman, *Maus I:* 52.
[22] Joshua Brown, "Of Mice and Memory." *Oral History Review* 16.1 (Spring 1988): 95.

smoke as a cloud drifting atop the Auschwitz crematorium, suggesting that Art's elicitation of Valdek's testimony is literally bringing the Holocaust back to life.[23] Vladek even remarks that, "All such things of the war, I tried to put out of my mind once and for all.... Until you rebuild me all this from your questions."[24] Spiegelman's visual techniques, such as his decision make Vladek's Auschwitz tattoo visible while Vladek is reciting his testimony, constantly allude to the ever-presence of Vladek's past trauma.[25] Another instance of this occurs while Vladek, Art, and Art's wife Françoise are driving while Vladek tells them the story of four girls who were hanged for participating in a revolt in Auschwitz.[26] On the same panel depicting his narration of this story, the four girls are illustrated hanging from the trees above the car in their concentration camp uniforms. In this instance, Spiegelman uses the visual nature of the comic book to his advantage by blending two temporalities to demonstrate Vladek's reality of having to continuously deal with the trauma of the past. As well, through this scene Spiegelman demonstrates the effect of post-memory by depicting Vladek's testimony as a narrative hybrid by interweaving history with the process of its generational transmission.[27]

Another notable element of Vladek's narrative is its non-linear form and well as the juxtaposition of his memory with historical fact. Vladek's testimony is largely composed of brief anecdotes and episodes that frequently blurs the line between past and present. In an effort to establish a semblance of chronology to Vladek's narrative, Spiegelman draws a timeline of his

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[23] Spiegelman, *Maus II:* 69; Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation.* (U of Minnesota Press, 2000), 205.
[24] Spiegelman, *Maus II:* 98.
[25] Spiegelman, *Maus I*: 12-14
[26] Spiegelman, *Maus II*: 79
[27] James E. Young, "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's 'Maus' and the Afterimages of History." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (1998): 669.

father's internment. However, his efforts are derailed when Vladek is unable to give a definitive account of his whereabouts, changing his story numerous times and finally asserting "We didn't wear watches is Auschwitz!"[28] Vladek's inability to recall his time at Auschwitz with specificity is emblematic of the effects that trauma has on memory.[29] Vladek's testimony demonstrates the ways that, when narrating memory, one engages in both a conscious and unconscious process of selection that can have a way of filtering out past trauma. The juxtaposition of Vladek's personal memory and historical fact is most evident when Art inquires about the orchestra that reportedly played at the Auschwitz gates.[30] Vladek insists that there was no orchestra, claiming: "No. At the gate I heard only guards and shouting."[31] Spiegelman forges a compromise between both accounts by including two frames depicting prisoners marching out of the Auschwitz gates — one with the orchestra and one without. Through this, Spiegelman takes advantage of the comic book medium to draw the audience's attention to discontinuity in the story by visually interlacing personal memory and historical fact in the same space.[32] Through this, Vladek's testimony highlights the reciprocal limitations of history and memory, asserting that memory deserves a place in historical record by giving both accounts legitimacy through their visual layering.[33]

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[28] Spiegelman, *Maus II*: 67-68
[29] Victoria A. Elmwood,"'Happy, Happy, Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale." *Biography* 27, no. 4 (2004): 697.
[30] *Maus II*: 54
[31] Ibid.
[32] Gillian Banner, *Holocaust literature: Schulz, Levi, Spiegelman and the memory of the offence.* No. 8. (Vallentine Mitchell, 2000): 133
[33] Young, "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past," 168.

Narrative Level Two: Art as the Intermediary Narrator

For Art, the act of narration enables him to establish a place for himself in his family's memory by asserting his role in rehabilitating his unlived past.[34] Spiegelman notes that even his visual artistic style was influenced by his father's trauma as he packs the pages of his story full of imagery, noting: "Five or six comics on one piece of paper ... [I am] my father's son."[35] This statement demonstrates the impact Vladek's miserly habits he developed as a result of his traumatic experience have a lasting legacy in the visual nature of *Maus*. Furthermore, as James E. Young notes, since the majority of second-generation survivors were born after the Holocaust, they seek only to represent their knowledge of these events as they were learned through transmission, which its demonstrated in *Maus* through Art's role as narrator.[36] Notably, *Maus* begins not in Poland but in Rego Park, New York in 1958.[37] On the opening page, Spiegelman gives his audience a sense of what it was like to grow up as a second-generation Holocaust survivor by illustrating an event from his childhood. Upon explaining to his father that he was abandoned by his friends, Vladek responds "Friends?... If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week…. Then you could see what it is, friends!"[38] By opening with this sequence, Art recalls the effects his father's memories have had on him, visually depicting his father's looming physical stature while young Art is shown literally shrinking beneath his father's monumental Auschwitz survival.[39] Art's experience of growing up in his father's shadow

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[34] Erin Heather McGlothlin, *Second-generation Holocaust Literature.* (New York: Camden House, 2006): 11.
[35] Hillary Chute, "The Shadow of a past Time": History and Graphic Representation in" Maus." *Twentieth Century Literature* 52, no. 2 (2006): 202.
[36] Young, "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past," 678.
[37] Spiegelman, *Maus I*: 5.
[38] Ibid., 6.
[39] Maria Roca Lizarazu, *In the shadows of memory: the Holocaust and the third generation.* (London : Vallentine Mitchell, 2016): 60.

demonstrates the way his father's history as a survivor makes him feel small and incompetent in comparison.[40] Therefore, beyond simply elucidating Vladek's testimony, Art's role as narrator makes clear his experience and a secondary victim of and witness to his father's traumatic testimony.

Prisoner on the Hell Planet, a story about his mother Anja's suicide that Spiegelman wrote previously, was inserted as a part of *Maus I*.[41] The scene includes a photo of Anja and Art in the upper left hand corner which, not only reminds the audience that this story is non-fictional, but evokes the sense of "present absence" Art feels towards his mother's suicide.[42] Through this scene, Spiegelman articulates the burden he continues to bear as a result of his parents' trauma — exemplifying the influence of "post-memory" as a theme in the narrative.[43] Marianne Hirsch comments on this theme by noting:

> Drawing *Maus,* it is implied, represents his attempt both to get deeper into his postmemory and to find a way out. In "Hell Planet" the two chronological levels of *Maus* merge, and in this convergence between past and present, destruction and survival, primary and secondary trauma – incarnated by Anja's suicide – lies the root of Art's (perhaps temporary) insanity.[44]

Additionally, Spiegelman's decision to depict Art wearing a concentration camp uniform in this scene serves to symbolize the inherited burden the uniform represents, establishing Art's connection to the trauma and legacy of the Holocaust through imagery and universal symbols of the Holocaust. Similarly, Art envisions himself as the victim of his parents' memory and

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[40] Sicher Efraim. *Breaking crystal: Writing and memory after Auschwitz.* (University of Illinois Press, 1998): 50.
[41] Spiegelman, *Maus I*: 161.
[42] Elmwood, 707; Amy Hungerford, "Surviving Rego Park: Holocaust Theory from Art Spiegelman to Berel Lang." *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (1999): 117.
[43] Chute, 207.
[44] Marianne Hirsch, *Family frames: Photography, narrative, and postmemory.* (Harvard University Press, 1997): 32.

experience, a phenomenon that is confirmed by his psychiatrist who asserts that Art is the "real survivor" of the guilt his parents took out on him.[45] Therefore, while Vladek is a victim at the hands of the Nazi regime, Art sees himself as a victim of his father's own miserliness and intolerance. This realization evokes a shift where this "survivor's tale" becomes Art's own rather than his father's and demonstrates the effect that generational transmission of trauma can have on second-generation survivors.

Narrative Level Three: Art's Meta-Commentary

Another significant reason children of the second-generation inherit trauma is because they feel they have a mission to communicate their parent's stories.[46] Elie Wiesel emphasized this sentiment in his assertion that, "Their role in a way is even more difficult than ours. They are responsible for a world they didn't create. They who did not go through the experience must transmit it"[47] As a result of this phenomenon, central to *Maus*' plot is Art's own perceived inadequacy in telling his father's story. Art makes reference to this throughout the narrative stating "I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father…how am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz…of the Holocaust?"[48] Art is plagued by a past that is not his own, and his attempt to fill this void constitutes a form of trauma in and of itself, at one point prompting Art to yell at his father "Enough! Tell me about Auschwitz!"[49] Later, while listening to a tape recording of this conversation, Spiegelman depicts Art visually shrinking as a result of the shame he feels for his ruthless pursuit of his father's narrative. Art's desire to understand the

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[45] Spiegelman, *Maus II*: 44.
[46] Berger, 186.
[47] Ibid., 1.
[48] Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 16.
[49] Ibid., 47.

source of his trauma is so desperate that, at one point he remarks, “I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!”[50] Yet, an unintended result of Art’s intense need to hear his father’s story is that Art is largely unconcerned with the effect this testimonial may have on his father. The observation has been made that “if one talks about the trauma without being truly heard or truly listened to, the telling might itself be lived as a return of the trauma – a re-experiencing of the event itself”.[51] Therefore, this moment of self-reflexivity demonstrates the effect that post-memory can have on inflicting trauma in the present-day by emphasizing Art’s not entirely selfless role in receiving Vladek’s testimony.

Since Spiegelman wrote much of *Maus II* in the wake of popular acclaim for *Maus I*, much of the narrative involves his own meta-commentary on the production of the work and his own role in representing the Holocaust. It is significant that Spiegelman pushes the boundaries of artistic representation of the Holocaust by choosing the medium of the comic book to tell his story. At first glance, the nature of the comic book may appear inappropriate to tackle the gravity of a subject like the Holocaust because of its perceived childish and trivial nature.[52] Conversely, by situating a nonfictional story in the caricatured comic space, Spiegelman captures the seeming implausibility of the Holocaust.[53] As well, the use of cartoons is an extension of the autobiographical nature of the work, as Spiegelman’s trade is that of a cartoonist rather than a

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[50] Ibid., 16.
[51] Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” In Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, eds. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History.* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 67.
[52] Thomas Doherty, "Art Spiegelman's Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust." *American literature* 68, no. 1 (1996): 71.
[53] Rothburg, 206.

historian and thus it is the most natural medium for him to tell his story.[54] Spiegelman defends his choice by saying “I’m literally giving a form to my father’s words and narrative, and that form for me has to do with panel size, panel rhythms, and visual structures of the page.”[55] One jarring panel depicts Art at his drawing table, sitting atop a massive pile of dead mice with thought bubbles reading "At least fifteen foreign editions [of *Maus*] are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or movie. (I don't wanna.) In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.) Lately I've been feeling depressed.”[56] This panel is emblematic of the pressure members of the second-generation feel to tell their parents story and fulfil their role in preserving Holocaust memory. At the same time, Spiegelman draws attention to the crisis of Holocaust representation by visualizing the way he has built a career off of others’ suffering. He engages with the dilemma of maintaining Holocaust memory through artistic means during a period when forms of commemoration in popular culture were coming under increased scrutiny.[57] However, by captioning the panel “Time Flies,” Spiegelman also underscores the danger of allowing Holocaust survivors’ memories to be forgotten if they are not commemorated.[58]

Overall, *Maus* is an example of the way that second-generation writing transcends its inability to fully know and remember the Holocaust.[59] This is accomplished by using the comic book form to stack narratives and narrators to explore the subjective process of memory and the

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[54] Costello, Lisa A. "History and Memory in a Dialogic of" Performative Memorialization" in Art Spiegelman's" Maus: A Survivor's Tale"." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 39, no. 2 (2006): 26.
[55] Chute, 200.
[56] Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 41.
[57] Michael E. Staub, "The Shoah Goes On and On: Remembrance and Representation in Art Spiegelman's Maus." *Melus* 20, no. 3 (1995): 41.
[58] Ibid.
[59] McGlothlin, 79.

legacy of trans-generational trauma. *Maus* is part of a newer generation of Holocaust remembrance that seeks to memorialize the Holocaust while simultaneously incorporating critiques of memory and memorialization.[60] At a moment in time when the last of the Holocaust survivors will soon no longer be able to give their testimony directly, the work of second-generation Holocaust survivors plays an important role in preserving their memory while grappling with questions of post-memory, trauma, and generational transmission. Additionally, the preservation of Holocaust memory through second-generation survivors paves the way for further study of the Holocaust through the lens of third-generation survivors — echoed by Spiegelman's dedication of the novel to his dead sibling Richieu and his son in order to symbolically connect members of the third-generation with the first.

[60] Andreas Huyssen, "Of mice and mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno." *New German Critique* 81 (2000): 76.

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